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RUEHNC/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 6513
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1722
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RUEHCL/AMCONSUL CASABLANCA 3535
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SUBJECT: SENATE PRESIDENT ON BILATERAL RELATIONS, THIRD TERM

REF: ALGIERS 750

Classified By: Ambassador David D. Pearce; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The Algerian Senate president said September 29 that, press reports notwithstanding, there had been no official movement on a constitutional revision paving the way for a third term for President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Senate President Abdelkader Bensalah told the Ambassador September 29 that nothing official had yet happened regarding a revision of the constitution and the possibility of a third term for Bouteflika. He said the press had been full of speculation, statements by various parties, and erroneous reporting, but neither he nor his colleagues knew yet whether Bouteflika intended to run for a third term or not. He expected to find out "when the actual document is submitted" proposing the revision. But, he added, at issue was much more than just a third term. At issue was rationalizing the distribution of powers within the executive.

¶3. (C) Bensalah said the constitution of 1989 had been done too quickly and had encouraged political pluralism "without protection," allowing religion to be exploited for political purposes. He described the Islamist trend of the 1990s as "inhiraaf" (deviant, impure Islam), which caused Algeria to regress to an "archaic" version of Islam. This prompted the reassessment and revision of the constitution in 1996. Since that time, he added, new issues had arisen as Algeria had increasingly stabilized, and it had become clear there was a need to rationalize better the distribution of powers within the executive branch of government. He did not expand on this, except to cite the "two presidents" issue -- i.e., the powers of the president and the powers of the prime minister.

¶4. (C) The Senate president said there were now more opportunities for bilateral engagement with the U.S. than ever before. Bensalah said technical assistance to the parliament had not occurred "at the level we had hoped," but he was pleased that legislative engagement within the context of MEPI would continue. Bensalah considered the visit of Secretary Rice a success, saying that it had highlighted many opportunities, particularly English-language education, which he considered a top priority. He said there was a strong current in Algerian schools and universities towards English, and that Algeria was determined to make strides in this area. Regarding commercial ties, he said that Algeria had no preference for any country over another, and simply put "Algeria's interests first." He specifically said U.S.

companies should not believe that French firms had an edge because of language and the long history between the two countries.

15. (C) COMMENT: According to the Algerian constitution, Bensalah would take over as interim head of state in the event that President Bouteflika becomes incapacitated or passes away, and would be responsible for organizing elections within 60 days. His take on the contents of a proposed constitutional amendment are consistent with what we have reported previously (ref A). We take his comment on the distribution of powers within the executive to include the possible creation of a vice presidency and/or the clarification of the powers of the prime minister. Popular belief is that either one would be seen as a sign of internal consensus within the regime on the identity of an eventual successor to Bouteflika. If Bensalah knew any more about Bouteflika's intentions or the timing of the actual amendment, he was not telling, but in our experience the current air of political mystery is due to the fact that only Bouteflika himself can speak to his intentions. Bensalah did make clear that he is eager for more U.S. engagement, a theme we have been hearing steadily as the Ambassador makes his round of introductory calls.

PEARCE